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# America's Secret Military Forces

'Special operations' is glamorous—and controversial.

**S**hortly before dawn on April 25, 1980, the most ambitious peacetime commando raid in U.S. military history lay in smoldering ruins in the Iranian desert—grim testimony to America's seeming impotence against terrorist threats. The botched hostage-rescue attempt was attributed to insufficient helicopter support, inadequate planning, confusion over command and failure to use the best resources the military afforded. Since then, the Reagan administration has undertaken an intense effort to revitalize America's elite, secret "special operations forces" for just such counter-terrorist missions and other angry little wars. But five years after the fiasco at Desert One, there are serious doubts—even among administration officials directly involved—that the United States could successfully field such a mission today.

The special-forces buildup itself has been shrouded in secrecy. Manpower has grown from 10,000 to 15,000, and the units' budgets have more than doubled—to \$500 million last year. But some of the appropriations have been disguised in the defense budget—just as some of the personnel sport civilian haircuts or false insignia to camouflage their movements. The units themselves range in and out of the shadows—from the relatively well-known Army Rangers and Green Berets to Task Force 160, the Army's secret helicopter unit whose existence was revealed for the first time only last year. Other special-operations units include Delta Force, the counterterrorist commandos involved at Desert One, and "psyops"—psychological operatives assigned to win hearts and minds behind enemy lines. In the Navy, the SEALs—Sea, Air and Land Soldiers—are expert in underwater demolition and reconnaissance. And the Air Force's First Special Operations Wing is trained and equipped to transport special-operations troops in and out of hostile territory.

**Grab Bag:** The activities of the units are even more closely guarded. U.S. counter-terrorist personnel have assisted or observed as many as 50 hostage situations around the world in the last five years, as

recently as the hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner in Iran last December. (One Task Force 160 pilot on standby deployment for the Los Angeles Olympics last summer was asked about his mission by a National Guardsman. "If I tell you, I'll have to kill you," he replied.) A grab bag of other special-operations forces—including Delta Force and Task Force 160—was used in the assault on Grenada—and their presence was one of the reasons the Reagan administration banned reporters from the early hours of the conflict. Last year three con-



*A Green Beret in training at Fort Bragg: No overall strategy?*

gressional committees investigated charges that such units have been used in combat in Central America in violation of the War Powers Act. Congress found no evidence to support the charges, and U.S. officials vigorously deny that the special-operations personnel have done more than advise and train indigenous forces there.

More details about the nation's "secret armies" may come to light this spring when the House and Senate Armed Services Committees begin a new round of inquiries—this time, to determine why the military has lagged in responding to Reagan's revitalization order. "[By 1983] we found that people were dumping water on our heads and telling us it was raining," fumes Assistant Secretary of Defense Noel Koch, head of the revitalization effort. "There was no progress on this—nothing." The problems range from inter-service rivalries to the military's

long-standing ambivalence about special-operations forces in general. Even helicopter support remains uncertain. Of nine Air Force choppers specially designed for counterterrorist operations, only seven are functioning—one fewer than were planned for the Iran mission. In the meantime, the Army's Task Force 160 has been trying to duplicate the Air Force's capabilities without its sophisticated gear. As a result, the unit has suffered a startling number of casualties in training accidents (page 24).

There have been some improvements under the Reagan initiative—most notably, a host of new military technology worthy of James Bond's "Q." Using a sort of underwater garage and a series of "swimmer delivery vehicles," Navy SEALs can leave a submerged submarine and carry out reconnaissance and demolition operations without ever surfacing. Portable satellite-linked communications terminals now enable commandos in remote desert regions to call anywhere in the world and even receive copies of intelligence data, maps and photographs. NEWSWEEK has learned that when Sudanese rebels kidnapped five Western relief workers in 1983, two Delta Force officers using a suitcase-size receiver obtained photos of vast uncharted desert areas and pinpointed the rebel compound. Perhaps the most controversial weapon was developed even before Reagan and is now prepositioned in Germany: a nuclear land mine one-twelfth as powerful as the bomb at Hiroshima. A smaller version—the "backpack nuke"—can stop an enemy advance, crater a landing strip or destroy key tactical targets.

**Avionics:** Helicopter technology has also improved since the Iran fiasco. In fact, better equipment was available at the time. NEWSWEEK has learned that if there had been indications that Ayatollah Khomeini

planned to kill the hostages, the U.S. military was prepared to attempt a second rescue—Operation Honeybear—using nine Sikorsky HH-53 helicopters designed for search and rescue missions.\* Outfitted with airborne refueling capabilities and avionics including terrain-following and avoidance radar, the HH-53s are far better equipped to navigate through a sandstorm like the one that hobbled Desert One. What's more, the Air Force has outfitted some HH-53s and some Combat Talon choppers with Stealth-like radar-resistant properties.

But that helicopter capability is at the heart of the biggest special-operations dispute in the administration. Last May, without consulting the Pentagon's civilian leadership, the Air Force and Army proposed to

\*The HH-53s, stationed in New Mexico, were not used in the original mission because the military preferred the Sea Stallions already on the nearby carrier Nimitz.

have the Army take over the helicopter mission—even though it lacked the Air Force's sophisticated avionics and highly-trained crews. Koch charges that the Air Force is trying to get out of the special-operations role altogether—seriously hampering the revitalization effort. Last fall, Deputy Defense Secretary William Howard Taft IV put the transfer on hold until the Army demonstrated it could assume the responsibility and the Air Force ensured that it would shoulder it in the interval. Air Force officials insist they *are* committed to special operations and that their report to Taft in coming weeks will prove it. Koch remains unconvinced. "What existed before this whole controversy began was inadequate," he says. "Since then, . . . there has been a degradation of the mission."

**Coordination:** Command structures also remain problematic. The Pentagon has consolidated authority for counterterrorist activities under the Joint Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, N.C. But the JSOC controls only about 10 percent of all U.S. special-operations forces—mainly Delta Force, trained primarily for hostage-rescue operations where the host country is cooperating. A counterterrorist raid in a hostile environment like Teheran would require a far larger force. The lack of coordination was evident in Grenada: Delta Force was unable to complete the capture of Richmond Hill prison—in part because an inter-service timing snafu caused the commandos to be delivered an hour behind schedule. In addition, four highly trained SEALs drowned in a highly classified mission that baffles even special-operations experts. Even today, planning for such an operation would still be ad hoc, with units thrown together at the last minute and a commander still to be named. "The first thing they would do is hold a get-acquainted social," scoffs one congressional staffer.

Special-operations experts complain that virtually no one in the top ranks of the military has a clear understanding of what the forces should be used for. And without an overall strategy, training for the units is often misdirected. Assigned to raise and direct indigenous forces behind enemy lines, the Green Berets, for example, need specialized training in everything from language skills to psychology. But they often must spend valuable time on administrative and even clean-up duties that could be performed by other units.

Veterans of special-operations units complain that the whole range of sabotage training aimed at water supplies, utility companies and communications is outmoded and unrealistic. "Suppose you wanted to turn out the lights in Teheran as a diversion," says one officer. "There's no real training for that." In a recent article in the Armed Forces Journal (cleared by military brass), Special Forces Capt. William Burgess complained that special-operations units have so little understanding of sabotage, infiltration

and other terrorist tactics that they rely on TV, movies and even sabotage manuals sold in the open press for guidance. Some "target folders" that should contain mission plans are empty, Burgess reported, and some units are operating under erroneous assumptions—like the notion that a .45 automatic could cripple a large electrical transformer.

Even as the debate rages over how special-operations units should be trained, the nature of the threats they face is changing. Since 1983, terrorists have largely shifted away from hostage-taking tactics to suicide bombings and isolated kidnappings. Countering such assaults requires another set of capabilities—from preplanned surgical retaliation to locating and neutralizing perpetrators before an attack. But the intelligence to support such missions remains deficient. In the aftermath of the Iran mission, when the CIA had no ground agents in Teheran, the military formed the Intelligence Support Agency to put such networks in place. But an FBI investigation last year disclosed that ISA operatives had engaged in such activities as lavish trips with their wives—and last fall, the Army disbanded the unit.

**Jitters:** Incidents like the ISA scandal have fueled long-standing congressional jitters about special-operations forces. Liberals fear that the clandestine nature of the units means they could be used to secretly intervene in foreign countries and conflicts. Administration officials argue that special-operations forces can serve as a deterrent to would-be terrorists and Soviet surrogates—and forestall the need to commit large numbers of U.S. troops later. They also contend—with much justification—that the United States is far more likely to face terrorist actions and angry little wars than the kind of full-scale engagements that the military establishment has traditionally prepared for. Still, even under Reagan's most ambitious plans, special operations would account for less than 1 percent of the U.S. military budget through 1990.

The coming debate on Capitol Hill may at last bring some order to the special-operations effort. For the first time, a special House subcommittee, headed by Rep. Dan Daniel of Virginia, has been empaneled to oversee the secret forces. And NEWSWEEK has learned that Daniel, other congressmen and top-ranking defense officials have discussed a variety of options that could revolutionize the direction of the special forces—among them, appointing a special assistant secretary of defense, establishing a joint military command or creating a major new government agency to command the disparate units. Whatever the mechanism, the defense establishment must ensure that it has a special-operations capability that can match the growing, changing threats the United States faces around the world.

MELINDA BECK with NICHOLAS M. HORROCK  
and RICHARD SANDZA



A Hughes 500 helicopter: Modern equipment—shared only by the CIA—for a crack Army chopper unit

## Death Waits in the Dark

The U.S. Army formed Task Force 160 in October 1981 as its own answer to the disaster at Desert One. Henceforth, it boasted, if Delta Force or other special-operations commandos needed helicopter support, the Army's own crack chopper unit would do the job. Based at Fort Campbell, Ky., and nicknamed the "Night Stalkers" for its daredevil night-training exercises, the TF160 adopted the motto, "Death waits in the dark." The slogan proved all too prophetic, as NEWSWEEK's Richard Sandza reports:

Three Vietnam-era Chinook helicopters spent the afternoon of March 20, 1983, practicing "rubber duck" insertions—dropping a rubber boat full of infiltrators into the water from a low altitude and then flying off. Leading the trio back to Chambers Air Station near Norfolk, Va., instructor-pilot Ralph Thompson decided to try one more run. His Chinook, with five on board, began to vibrate, then pitched into the ocean. "I heard a sploosh. Crunch," reported Chief Warrant Officer Thomas Crossan, who was piloting the chopper just behind. "We hovered, waiting for someone to bob up. After the first five minutes, we knew there wasn't going to be anyone."

Four months later, Crossan and five others were killed when their Chinook slammed into a tiny island in Lake Michigan. The next month, a Black Hawk helicopter came apart in midair over southern Tennessee, killing all three crew members. Six weeks later, a pilot-in-training flew another Black Hawk into the ocean off Panama, killing his instructor and his crew chief. In all, 16 Night Stalkers died in training accidents in 1983—60 percent of all Army helicopter fatalities—even though the unit flew fewer than 2 percent of Army choppers.

**'John Wayne':** Army officials insist that TF160 is not simply duplicating Air Force capabilities, but serving as a test bed for new equipment and skills—pushing the outside of the envelope for helicopter flying. "Getting killed is one of the job risks," says Army public-affairs officer Craig Mac Nab. But some former unit members say that the risks were not all necessary. Several pilots who complained about safety were transferred for not being "John Wayne enough"; others were stripped of first-string status. "Safety was not first in the 160," says one former unit member. "It came in when you got to it."

Col. Terence Henry, who took com-

mand just three days before the Lake Michigan crash, immediately halted the rubber-duck missions, court-martialed the maintenance crew involved in the Tennessee accident and badgered the Pentagon into supplying more modern equipment; the Army had already set a precedent by providing TF160 with sleek new Hughes 500 helicopters like those used by the CIA. And since October 1983, there have been no fatalities. Henry, now head of the Army Safety

Center at Fort Rucker, Ala., is credited with stabilizing TF160—and, he says, the unit "can perform any mission the Army Special Operations Command would send it on."

But there are still questions about the 1983 deaths. Though Henry claims that pilots and maintenance crews failed to follow procedure, some former unit members and other critics say the task force had to perform hazardous exercises with inadequate equipment—like the unit's night-vision goggles. The NVG's had proved so unsuitable for low-altitude flying (like "looking through two toilet-paper tubes") that other Army Chinook pilots were barred from using them. "You can't see and you can't tell that you can't see," says Frank McGlade, a former Army safety director. Wearing his NVG's, Crossan probably mistook the trees and hills of the island in Lake Michigan for ground fog, former TF160 members say. In all, at least nine TF160 pilots have been killed under NVG navigation. Others have returned to base with wires dangling from chopper skids—evidence that they flew through wires and miraculously survived.

**Gadgetry:** Veterans contend that Crossan's Chinook never would have crashed had it been equipped with advanced radar available to Air Force and Navy aircraft. But Army brass are skeptical of high-tech gadgetry. There are still no public plans, for instance, to provide TF160 with the Air Force's new Night Hawk helicopter, specially equipped to make night forays safer. "Why would they want Night Hawks?" Henry asks. "I'm not interested in buying somebody else's thing."

Such reasoning infuriates the Pentagon's civilian leadership. But the debate has raged mostly in secret, like most of TF160's operations. Until recently, TF160 mishaps didn't appear on Army accident reports; task-force members injured or killed were listed elsewhere. Some families had to file Freedom of Information Act requests to learn details of their sons' deaths; others were told the information was classified. The unit's secrecy even followed one victim of the Lake Michigan crash to his wake. When his buddies' talk bordered on disclosure of their activities, one officer cleared civilians from the room and chewed out TF160 personnel.

So secret are the unit's operations that there has been speculation that some of the 1983 training accidents were staged to cover up fatalities the unit incurred in Central America. The Pentagon and TF160 members vigorously deny that unit personnel have ever been deployed in Central America. But if lives were lost in unnecessarily hazardous training, the truth is just as scandalous.



Colonel Henry: A stabilizing influence